

# **GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP**

## **Notes following the Fourteenth Meeting, 23rd March 2011**

The fourteenth meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Christian Kay who acted as master of ceremonies, and also organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was Dr Carole Biggam, English Language, University of Glasgow, who is a historical semanticist specializing in the fields of colour and plant-names in Indo-European languages, particularly in Old English and British Medieval Latin. As a former archaeologist who defected to linguistics, Carole's approach to her research is multidisciplinary wherever appropriate.

### **Carole Biggam spoke on 'The End of the World (Colour Survey)'**

"In 1976, a few years after the publication of their ground-breaking book on suggested universals in the acquisition of basic colour terms in language, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay set up the World Colour Survey (WCS) at the University of California at Berkeley. Its purpose was to research the colour systems of over one hundred languages around the world whose speakers had had minimal contact with major world languages like English and Spanish. The data has been collected, studied and analyzed over the intervening years against a background of published progress reports and critical articles from opponents of Berlin and Kay's theories. In 2010, the final report was published in book form, with the copyright date of 2009. This book thus enshrines the results of over thirty years work, much agonizing and accommodation of new discoveries, and, sadly, a record of colour systems which are fast disappearing from the world. The talk will provide an introduction to the first evolutionary sequence of 1969, the latest version (1999), and the most important of the WCS team's conclusions".

After introducing the background to the setting up of the World Colour Survey, Carole described the two hypotheses which it was intended to test, namely, the likelihood of a total inventory of eleven basic colour categories around the world, and the further possibility that the categories were developed by all societies *in the same order*. The first 1969 evolutionary sequence (of category acquisition) was explained, and some of the problems with the research methodology described. The improved methodology of the WCS was then presented, and the final report on one particular language was taken at random to illustrate the procedure. The results for Iwam, a language of Papua New Guinea, demonstrated the nature of macro-categories, the differences between native speakers as to their category boundaries, and the basic colour terms used to label their colour categories. The current version of the evolutionary sequence was then introduced and discussed, especially its considerable differences from the original 1969 sequence, and the present set of five 'trajectories' by which societies and their languages 'move' along the sequence. Finally, Kay and Maffi's model of category acquisition was described, including the few languages which illustrate the Emergence Hypothesis. The audience was, hopefully, convinced that there is no one 'obvious' colour system.

## News

- If anyone has ideas for next academic year's GCSG programme (2011-12) or wishes to offer a talk themselves, will they please get in touch with Carole Biggam at [Carole.Biggam@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Carole.Biggam@glasgow.ac.uk).
- Please help everyone by announcing any colour-related conferences or publications that come to your attention, on our discussion list at [ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk) Please also raise there any of your colour queries or problems, as our multidisciplinary membership is very likely to be able to help.